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Citation: Flynn, J. and Sumberg, J. (2017) 'Youth savings groups in Africa: they're a family affair', *Enterprise Development and Microfinance* 28.3: 147–61.
http://dx.doi.org/10.3362/1755-1986.16-00005

Official URL: http://www.developmentbookshelf.com/doi/abs/10.3362/1755-1986.16-00005

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Youth savings groups in Africa: they're a family affair

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Based on fieldwork in Tanzania, Zambia, Uganda, and Ghana, in the paper we provide new evidence that young people's engagement with savings groups in Africa is deeply embedded in networks of family and social relations. Savings group members rely on money that is given to them by partners and family members to make savings contributions to the groups, while they also transfer some of their share-outs and loans to family members and friends. This is particularly true for younger members. As such we argue that the socially embedded nature of young people's engagement with savings group needs to be taken into account. The tension between the primary focus on the individual within youth saving programming, and the socially embedded nature of their engagement, has important implications for programme design, implementation and evaluation.

Keywords: microfinance, VSLA, savings groups, youth savings, YSLA - Youth Savings and Loans Associations, financial inclusion, member engagement, share-outs and loans

THIS PAPER IS ABOUT SAVINGS groups in Africa that specifically target young people. There is growing interest in the use of youth savings groups to address financial inclusion and support entrepreneurship and employment, but also as a vehicle for changing behaviour and teaching the benefits of financial planning and discipline.

Savings and credit groups of various types, often referred to as Rotating Savings and Credit Associations (ROSCAs), are found throughout Africa and form a long-standing part of the social and economic underpinning of both rural and urban societies (e.g. Bouman, 1995; Kimuyu, 1999). Formalized savings and credit groups, commonly called Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs), have been promoted as a specific development intervention since the mid-1990s. VSLAs are typically groups of up to 30 members, who meet regularly to save and to issue loans from the accumulated savings within the group. The interest on the loans provides a return on the members' savings, which is 'shared out', typically at the end of a nine- to twelve-month cycle. Groups are generally established by someone familiar with the methodology, and a lock box is used to deposit and keep the savings (Gash and Odell, 2013). A key difference between savings groups and self-help groups is that the money is often not shared out in self-help groups. Furthermore, government

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http://dx.doi.org/10.3362/1755-1986.16-00005, ISSN: 1755-1978 (print) 1755-1986 (online)

programmes link most self-help groups to banks, which is not the case for savings groups. Savings groups are increasingly popular; membership reached 1.5 million in 2009 (Gash and Odell, 2013), 10 million in 2015 (Allen, 2015), and the CARE US Access Africa Initiative is seeking to bolster this to 30 million within the decade (Helmore, 2011).

The benefits of savings groups have been widely proclaimed (see Ashe and Neilan, 2014; Boonyabanca, 2001; Lowicki-Zucca et al., 2014; Wilson et al., 2010). For proponents, savings groups are seen as a 'springboard' towards formal financial inclusion, fostering good savings behaviour and asset accumulation (Smith et al., 2015). One particularly important claim about savings groups, made by Allen and Panetta (2010: 5), is that:

> Livelihoods of households and entire communities have been transformed by the power of members knowing that at any time they can call on savings, credit, and insurance benefits in a manner that is flexible, appropriate to their situation, and set in an administrative and social culture where they feel understood and valued.

Programmes promoting savings and savings groups have increasingly targeted young people. It is argued that savings groups are particularly useful for young people, as they:

> support the acquisition of domestic and business assets which may, in turn: 1) improve general living conditions; 2) serve as collateral for formal financial services; 3) increase business investments; 4) mitigate the risk of asset-stripping to meet emergencies and short-term cash-flow needs; and 5) have positive behavioural effects (Markel and Panetta, 2014: 18).

These authors also suggest that savings groups are 'ideal "starter system[s]"' (p. 3) that provide young people with a critical first rung on the ladder of financial inclusion.

In this paper we provide evidence that adds to the body of literature on savings groups and young people's engagement with savings. In line with other literature on youth savings, we find that young people's engagement with savings groups is deeply embedded in a network of family and social relations. Savings group members rely on money that is given to them by parents, boyfriends, and husbands to save, and give some of their share-outs and loans to family and friends. This is particularly the case for younger members. Based on this evidence, we argue that there is a tension between the focus of programmes that promote savings groups based on individual members and the reality of this socially embedded engagement. This tension has implications for programme design, implementation, and evaluation.

The next section of the paper reviews existing literature on savings groups and youth savings. We then describe our data collection methods. Following this, we present findings that illustrate some of the ways in which engagement with youth savings groups is socially embedded. The last section discusses the implications of these findings and ends with a suggestion that those designing and implementing youth savings group programmes need to critically examine their underlying assumptions about individuals, society, and social relations, and the individual and/or social basis of economic activity.

Savings groups and youth savings

Despite Allen and Panetta's (2010) claim of the 'transformative' power of savings groups, results from a series of randomized control trials (RCTs) paint a more variable and nuanced picture of savings groups (Gash and Odell, 2013; Karlan et al., 2012). Karlan et al. (2012) studied savings groups in Ghana, Malawi, and Kenya and identified a number of short-term impacts (they must be considered short-term because members had been part of a group for 15 months on average and only 61 per cent of members had gone through a full savings cycle of 8 to 12 months). These impacts included that the VSLAs substantially increased the portfolio of financial services available to participants, helped women invest in their businesses, enabled more businesses, even though some failed and led to improvements in women's intra-household decision-making power (but not to changes in women's involvement in the community). On the other hand, no significant changes in households' ability to mitigate economic shocks were observed, nor were any changes in agricultural production, livestock holdings, or the accumulation of household assets detected. The use of health services and health expenditures remained unaffected, and no impacts were seen on housing conditions, food consumption, or non-food expenditures. Gash and Odell (2013) summarize the findings of seven different RCTs conducted in Malawi, Uganda, Ghana, Mali, Kenya, Tanzania, and Burundi. There are a number of important caveats around the findings, but a key insight was that people who joined savings groups tended to be relatively wealthier and more socially and financially active than non-members, although overall the programmes reached the very poor. Also, the availability of savings groups clearly increased savings and the use of credit in treatment areas, but findings on whether savings groups increased asset ownership were mixed. In relation to business impacts, the collective evidence from the RCTs was also mixed. Although selected studies showed evidence of increased business-related spending, profits, and the likelihood that women own a business, these outcomes were not observed in all of the RCTs. Impacts on health and education spending were both mixed and limited, and three RCTs looked extensively at both community engagement and individual empowerment, and found very little impact. However, some impact on household resilience was observed: increased food security among treatment households suggested that shocks may have had less catastrophic results for group members.

Research commissioned by Plan International in Ghana showed that savings groups can have diverse effects on educational expenditure: they help pay for education in some contexts and not in others (Cameron and Ananga, n.d., 2015). These authors conclude that:

> There is a need for caution about overselling savings groups, both in international debates and at the level of the villages where they are being introduced […] they are not a cheap substitute for more costly interventions that may be needed to ensure that children's rights, including free access to a quality education, are fulfilled (Cameron and Ananga, 2015: 1039).

Research literature that specifically addresses youth savings is limited. Youth savings accounts with formal banking institutions, as promoted by the YouthSave consortium (https://www.newamerica.org/youthsave/), have received some research attention. Deshpande and Zimmerman (2010) reviewed trends in practice and gaps in knowledge and concluded that:

> promoting youth savings may have the potential to be a high-leverage intervention, with positive effects on youth development and financial inclusion. However, little is known about what types of youth savings products and services would best contribute to both goals, or how these contributions might differ with context. Especially in the developing world, financial institutions, donors, NGOs, and governments have little empirical evidence upon which to base decisions regarding whether and when to invest resources in promoting youth savings on a large scale. This is true even though, as detailed above, interest in YSAs as policy tools is growing (p.18).

Zou et al. (2015) also studied YouthSave in Ghana and Kenya and noted the importance of family and social networks in supporting student savings in Ghana: 'In almost every case, parents and other family members were the main source of income for the youth to deposit into the YouthSave account' (p. 69). Young people reported that 'parents, family members, school stakeholders, peers, and bank staff – play a major role in opening accounts and making deposits' (p. 72). These findings are intriguing and suggestive, although the Zou et al. study was based on a sample of only eight young savers. Also in relation to YouthSave, Johnson et al. (2015: 5) found that 'The majority of the youth (84 per cent) indicated that savings would likely come from family', and that young people were more likely to save when their parents were co-signatories, demonstrating the role parents can play in youth savings (ibid.: 94–5). The findings from the UNCDF YouthStart study were similar: parents or visiting relatives provided much, if not most, of the savings for young savers, and this was particularly important for younger savers (under 15 years) (Hopkins and Perdomo, 2011).

Method

The data reported in this paper was collected as part of an academic partnership between the Banking on Change (BoC) programme and the Institute of Development Studies (IDS). BoC was a joint programme involving Plan International, CARE International, and Barclays Bank (Markel and Panetta, 2014). It supported access to financial services by mobilizing individuals into savings groups so they can regularly save and borrow. BoC promoted itself as savings- rather than credit-led, and aimed to allow people to build assets at their own pace. From 2013 to 2015, the programme had a particular focus on young people. In addition to savings groups, BoC provided training in financial education, enterprise, and employability skills and created links to formal finance as appropriate. BoC operated in seven countries: Egypt, Ghana, India, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia. By the end of 2015, it had established around 11,000 Youth Savings Groups involving some 240,000 members.

Fieldwork took place between April 2015 and August 2015 in Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, and Ghana. Two BoC savings groups were identified in each country for inclusion in the research (Table 1). Information was gathered through group discussions and through 57 detailed interviews with individual savings group members. Interviewees were selected specifically to include different saving and borrowing patterns, but in making the selections we were also mindful of baseline survey status, age, and gender. The strategy used to identify savings groups and group members for interview was meant to capture the range of savings group participants as well as savings and borrowing patterns, and not to yield a representative sample. We also analysed savings and borrowing activities as recorded in ledger books and passbooks. In total, over the eight groups, the ledger books and passbooks allowed us to construct indicators of engagement for 280 individuals.

Table 1 Youth savings groups

Group	*Location*	*No. of members*	*Cycle No.1*	*Share value1, 2*	*Share value in GBP1,3*	*Meeting frequency*
1 Tanzania	Dar es Salaam (Vingunguti Dist.)	30	2	TZS 2,000	£0.56	Weekly
2 Tanzania	Kibaha District	18	2	TZS 1,000	£0.28	Weekly
3 Uganda	Busia District	30	2	UGX 1,000	£0.19	Weekly
4 Uganda	Kasese District	26	2	UGX 500	£0.10	Weekly
5 Zambia	Chisamba District	30	3	ZMW 20	£1.64	Monthly
6 Zambia	Chisamba District	11	3[4]	ZMW 10	£0.82	Monthly
7 Ghana	Brong Ahafo Region	22	2	GHS 0.40	£0.06	Weekly
8 Ghana	Volta Region	30	3	GHS 3	£0.46	Weekly

Notes: [1] At time of fieldwork.

[2] A 'share' refers to a standard unit of saving whose value (or price) was determined by each group at the beginning of each cycle. Members decided on the number of shares they wanted to buy at each meeting (typically up to a maximum of five shares).

[3] Values retrieved from www.xe.com.

[4] This group was actually in its fifth cycle, but was dissolved and re-formed after the second cycle. The new group was thus in its third cycle. However, three members (from the group's original 14 members) remained throughout the five cycles.

The interviews were open-ended and explored a number of areas, including a member's income-generating activities, family situation, motivations for joining the group, savings and use of loans and share-outs, trainings, challenges, and possible improvements to the model. On average, interviews lasted approximately 1.5–2 hours. Notes from the interviews were entered into a computer using Word, then reformatted under a standard set of headings (Employment, Savings, Loans, etc.). These documents were then imported into Nvivo and coded, which allowed information pertaining to particular questions, issues, or discussion points to be easily extracted and analysed.

The 57 individuals interviewed during the course of this research, each a member of one of the eight youth savings groups, were aged between 13 and

36 years old. BoC targeted youth up to the age of 35 but focused on those under 25 (Plan International UK, 2016). Although most of our interviewees were considered 'youth' in the context of BoC, they found themselves in a range of different life situations. Some were students still wholly dependent on parents, while others had three or four children of their own; and some were just beginning to engage with the world of work, while others had one or more well-established income-generating activities. To facilitate the analysis, we assigned each interviewee to one of five categories: 1. Student (n = 18, or 31.6 per cent); 2. Working, no children, not with a partner (n = 15, or 26.3 per cent); 3. Working, no children, with a partner (n = 2, or 3.5 per cent); 4. Working, children, not with a partner (n = 5, or 8.8 per cent); and 5. Working, children, with a partner (n = 17, or 29.8 per cent).

The gender and age distributions of interviewees across these categories are shown in Table 2 and the distribution of the categories across the youth savings groups are shown in Table 3.

Table 2 Gender and age distribution of 57 interviewees by category

Category	*Gender*		*Age*		
	Female %	*Male %*	*Average*	*Minimum*	*Maximum*
1. Student (n = 18)	44	56	15	13	23
2. Working; no children; not with a partner (n = 15)	40	60	21	16	25
3. Working; no children; with a partner (n = 2)	100	0	22	20	23
4. Working; children; not with a partner (n = 5)	100	0	28	22	36
5. Working; children; with a partner (n = 17)	88	12	25	20	33

Table 3 Distribution of interviewees by group and category

Group	*Student*	*Working; no children; not with a partner*	*Working; no children; with a partner*	*Working; children; not with a partner*	*Working; children; with a partner*	*Total*
1 Tanzania	1	1	0	0	5	**7**
2 Tanzania	1	2	0	1	3	**7**
3 Uganda	0	2	0	0	4	**6**
4 Uganda	0	3	1	1	1	**6**
5 Zambia	2	2	0	1	1	**6**
6 Zambia	2	2	0	1	2	**7**
7 Ghana	8	1	0	0	0	**9**
8 Ghana	4	2	1	1	1	**9**
Total	**18**	**15**	**2**	**5**	**17**	**57**

Findings

Savings and borrowing at group level

Weekly group-level savings indicators (average, median, minimum, and maximum for all members, not just the interviewees) by cycle are given in Table 4. For purposes of comparison, these are shown in local currency, in GBP equivalent and as a percentage of the national weekly minimum wage. The table illustrates several important points. Firstly, there are significant differences in savings within some groups: for example, in Group 3 (Uganda) the first cycle minimum and maximum weekly savings amounts were 615 and 5,000 shillings, respectively; while in the second cycle the minimum and maximum weekly savings amounts were 875 and 5,000 shillings, respectively (we return to the issue of within-group variation later). Secondly, in one group in the first cycle and two groups in the second cycle, top savers are managing to save over 40 per cent of the official minimum weekly wage. Thirdly, an increase in share price can be associated with significantly higher savings (e.g. Group 1 increased its share price from TZS 1,000 to TZS 2,000 between the first and second cycle, and the average weekly savings amount increased from TZS 4,010 to TZS 8,562). Finally, the savings amounts achieved by Group 7, the predominantly student group in Ghana, were very low compared with the other group in Ghana.

Weekly group level borrowing indicators (average, median, minimum, and maximum) by cycle are also shown in Table 4. Again, significant variation can be observed within and between groups. A key point is that while all members save, not all members borrow. For some members it is an individual decision not to borrow, while for others, including those in some student groups, the rules under which the group operates may discourage or prohibit lending.

Interviewees and income generation

Interviewees reported involvement in a wide variety of income-generating activities (although few of the students reported generating income). The majority of these were relatively low-skill, low-investment activities such as small-scale agriculture and livestock, casual farm labour, mud block and charcoal making, small-scale food preparation, hair plaiting, and petty trade. A few reported other income-generating activities. For instance, a 22-year-old single woman (Cat. 2) living near Dar es Salaam and a 23-year-old female university student (Cat. 1) reported establishing an M-PESA 'business' together (see Mugambi et al., 2014); and a 22-year-old single man (Cat. 2) established a recording studio by the side of a main road, a few kilometres away from his home village. Overall, much of this activity is on a small scale, and only three interviewees reported involvement in what might be considered businesses. A 30-year-old married woman living near Dar es Salaam (Cat. 5) runs a shop and bar – in addition to the doughnuts she makes, she sells water, ugali (maize) flour, drinks, and other items. A 20-year-old single man (Cat. 2) is a house painter with two employees. He reports writing out contracts for large jobs, and receives cash advances to help pay for materials.

Table 4 Weekly group-level savings and loan indicators by cycle

Group	Unit	1st cycle savings			2nd cycle savings			1st cycle loans			2nd cycle loans		
		Median	*Min*	*Max*	*Median*	*Min*[1]	*Max*	*Median*	*Min*[2]	*Max*	*Median*	*Min*[2]	*Max*
1 (T)	In local currency	4,135	1,577	5,000	10,000	3,714	10,000	6,731	0.00	16,442	10,714	0.00	28,571
1 (T)	GBP	1.15	0.44	1.39	2.78	1.03	2.78	1.87	0.00	4.58	2.98	0.00	7.95
1 (T)	% of weekly min. wage	18%	7%	22%	43%	16%	43%	29%	0%	71%	46%	0%	124%
2 (T)	In local currency	4,317	1,308	5,385	4,563	1,125	5,000	4,327	1,923	9,615	2,500	0.00	15,000
2 (T)	GBP	1.20	0.36	1.50	1.27	0.31	1.39	1.20	0.54	2.68	0.70	0.00	4.18
2 (T)	% of weekly min. wage	19%	6%	23%	20%	5%	22%	19%	8%	42%	11%	0%	65%
3 (U)[3]	In local currency	2,481	615	5,000	2,700	875	5,000				3,525	500	24,750
3 (U)[3]	GBP	0.47	0.12	0.95	0.51	0.17	0.95				0.67	0.10	4.72
3 (U)[3]	% of weekly min. wage	23%	6%	46%	25%	8%	46%				33%	5%	229%
4 (U)	In local currency	929	429	2,214	1,304	598	2,500	1,043	143	4,286	2,294	588	15,804
4 (U)	GBP	0.18	0.08	0.42	0.25	0.11	0.48	0.20	0.03	0.82	0.44	0.11	3.01
4 (U)	% of weekly min. wage	9%	4%	21%	12%	6%	23%	10%	1%	40%	21%	5%	146%
5 (Z)	In local currency	7.67	0.77	15.34	3.20	0.00	21.99	10.12	0.00	92.08	5.11	0.00	52.26
5 (Z)	GBP	0.63	0.06	1.26	0.26	0.00	1.81	0.83	0.00	7.57	0.42	0.00	4.30
5 (Z)	% of weekly min. wage	5%	1%	11%	2%	0%	16%	7%	0%	66%	4%	0%	37%
6 (Z)	In local currency	6.04	3.45	8.92	3.22	2.30	3.68	32.22	22.57	65.88	8.29	4.60	19.33
6 (Z)	GBP	0.50	0.28	0.73	0.26	0.19	0.30	2.65	1.86	5.42	0.68	0.38	1.59
6 (Z)	% of weekly min. wage	4%	2%	6%	2%	2%	3%	23%	16%	47%	6%	3%	14%
7 (G)[4]	In local currency	0.45	0.20	0.70	1.00	0.66	1.42	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	3.85
7 (G)[4]	GBP	0.07	0.03	0.11	0.15	0.10	0.22	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.60
7 (G)	% of weekly min. wage	1%	0%	2%	2%	2%	3%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	9%

Group	*Unit*	*1st cycle savings*			*2nd cycle savings*			*1st cycle loans*			*2nd cycle loans*		
		Median	*Min*	*Max*	*Median*	*Min*[1]	*Max*	*Median*	*Min*[2]	*Max*	*Median*	*Min*[2]	*Max*
8 (G)	In local currency	9.33	6.55	10.00	9.45	5.25	10.00	10.63	0.00	41.75	9.50	0.00	27.50
8 (G)	GBP	1.44	1.01	1.55	1.49	0.81	1.55	1.65	0.00	6.46	1.51	0.00	4.26
8 (G)	% of weekly min. wage	22%	16%	24%	23%	13%	24%	25%	0%	99%	23%	0%	65%
Avg.	GBP	0.71	0.30	0.99	0.87	0.34	1.19	1.20	0.35	3.93	0.92	0.07	3.82
Avg.	% of weekly min. wage	13%	5%	19%	16%	6%	22%	16%	4%	52%	18%	2%	86%

[1] The zeros in this column indicate that there were some members who had not managed to save money in the 2nd cycle.

[2] The zeros in this column indicate that some members chose not to borrow.

[3] 1st cycle passbooks, and thus loan data, were unavailable for this group, explaining the blank area in the 1st cycle loan section.

[4] No loans were recorded for the 1st cycle in this group, thus explaining the 0s in the 1st cycle loan section.

And a 25-year-old single man (Cat. 2) buys maize through traders from various regions in Tanzania, mills the grain and resells the flour to small shops in the surrounding area. He usually buys and sells about 5–10 sacks per week, and used a small loan from the savings group to visit the Tanga area to try to identify cheaper suppliers. He wants to open a wholesale shop.

Sources of savings

Interviewees reported using their own funds, funds from other individuals (e.g. spouse, boyfriend, parent, ex-partner, or other family members), or funds from other sources (e.g. existing savings, informal loans) to save through the savings groups. Of the 20 women with partners (including one with an ex-partner), nine reported using money given to them for family expenses in order to save. Four, including one of these nine, reported that their partners give them extra money when they do not have sufficient funds to save. Ten respondents mentioned receiving help from family members (mostly parents) or relatives when they did not have money to save. A 14-year-old schoolboy (Cat. 1) reported that he gets money to save from his father and brothers; a 16-year-old girl (Cat. 2) reported that around twice per month her mother helps her to save by giving her money; and a 22-year-old male (Cat. 2) reported that he sometimes 'pesters' his parents to give him money to save.

Interviewees from Ghana who were not autonomous (i.e. whose income-generating activities were not sufficient to make them independent) contributed to the savings group primarily through money they received from their parents or guardians. Of the nine members of a school-based savings group in Ghana who were interviewed, all reported using some of the pocket money given by their parents or guardians to save, and six of the nine reported that a parent or guardian also contributed money directly towards their savings. For some this was a frequent occurrence, for others less so. Even outside of school-based savings groups, two young members living at home reported receiving pocket money from guardians, which they then saved. Four young interviewees in one of the Ghana groups were explicitly saving for their parents or guardians: these individuals might best be thought of as 'surrogate savers'.

Overall, breaking down sources of savings per category, the proportion of members who reported receiving money from members of their social networks which they used to save was 83 per cent (15/18) for students (Cat. 1); 53 per cent (8/15) for members who were single and without children (Cat. 2); 100 per cent (2/2) for members with partners but without children (Cat. 3); 40 per cent (2/5) for members without partners but who had children (Cat. 4); and 53 per cent (9/17) for members with partners and with children (Cat. 5). For the members who received money from their social networks, Cat. 1 and Cat. 2 members (those with the least amount of responsibility) overwhelmingly received their money from parents (with whom they lived), and to a lesser extent relatives (with whom they did or did not live). All the members with partners, with or without children (i.e. Cat. 3 and Cat. 5), received their money from their partners, with a few also receiving money from relatives or neighbours. Cat. 4 members who received money did so either from parents or from an ex-partner.

Share-outs and loans

Share-outs are distributed to group members at the end of each savings cycle, and in principle comprise the value of the shares purchased during the cycle (i.e. the total amount saved), plus a proportion of any accrued interest, minus any outstanding interest or loan payments (though the latter are in principle supposed to be paid back before the share-out occurs). All interviewees were asked how they had used the share-outs they had received and the loans they had taken. Many reported that individual share-outs and loans were often divided up and used for several purposes. In total, interviewees reported 100 ways that they had used their share-outs and 185 ways they had used their loans (determining the money value of each use was more problematic and these are not reported here).

Share-outs were reportedly used to support income-generating activities, pay education expenses, transfer funds to a family member, and pay household expenses with similar frequencies, and together these accounted for 60 per cent of all reported uses (Table 5). While there were some big differences across the interviewee categories in how frequently share-outs were used for particular purposes, within all categories family transfers accounted for between 10 and 15 per cent of reported uses. As examples, a 23-year-old single woman (Cat. 1) reported giving her share-out to her mother to do with as she wished; a 35-year-old married woman who sometimes attended YSG meetings on her 20-year-old son's behalf (Cat. 2) and who eventually replaced him during the second (current) cycle reported that the share-out was 'presented' to her husband in his position as head of the household; a 24-year-old single man (Cat. 2) reported giving part of a share-out to his family; and a 23-year-old woman (Cat. 3) said she gave her share-out to her boyfriend to invest in his motorcycle taxi business (and she expects him to help pay for a shipping container in which to locate her fashion and tailoring business; he already contributes half of her savings). Overall, interviewees in all the categories

Table 5 Comparison of reported use of share-outs and loans

Reported use	*Share-outs (%)*	*Loans (%)*
Invest in income-generating activity	16	42
Education expenses	15	4
Family transfer (share-outs) Given to or used by someone else (loans)	14	15
Household expenses	14	3
Invest in farming or gardening	10	18
Other	31	18
Total	**100**	**100**

Note: Share-outs, 100 reported uses in total; Loans, 185 reported uses in total predominantly transferred share-outs to parents or caregivers. The exception was the one interviewee in Cat. 3 who reported transferring share-outs to her partner.

Over all interviewees, 42 per cent of reported uses for borrowed funds was to invest in an income-generating activity, and an additional 18 per cent was to invest in farming or gardening (some or all of which was for income generation). Across the different categories of interviewees, loans being given to or used by someone else accounted for 15 per cent of uses, and this varied from 32 per cent for students to only 5 per cent for interviewees who were working with children and a partner (Cat. 5). As examples, a 23-year-old woman (Cat. 5) took a loan that her parents then used to improve their house so they could generate rental income; a 19-year-old single man (Cat. 2) used a loan to help his family buy windows for their house (they did not help with the repayment); and a 22-year-old married woman (Cat. 5) gave half of a loan she took to her husband. In addition, a 14-year-old schoolboy (Cat. 1) took a loan that his father used to finance his farming activities, and an 18-year-old male student (Cat. 1) reported taking a loan that his uncle (his guardian) used to invest in his garden. The share-outs and loans of the four surrogate savers in Ghana were used exclusively by those who provided the money to save, and were invested in their income-generating activities or to cater for household expenses, including their children's education. Overall, while those to whom the student loans were transferred were all parents or caregivers, there was a greater variety among those who received loans from members of the other categories. Parents or caregivers were still the most prominent recipients of loan transfers (38 per cent) in the other four categories, but loans were also transferred to siblings, relatives, friends, family friends, partners, and neighbours.

Discussion and conclusions

In the previous section, we presented new evidence that illustrates the degree to which members' engagement with youth savings groups is dependent on and embedded within networks of family and social relations. Many members save with funds given to them by husbands, boyfriends, parents and guardians, and a not insignificant proportion of share-outs and loans are given to family members and others for their use. The interviews provided many examples of sharing, cooperation, joint action, and co-investment, and except a few examples of women wanting to keep their spouses in the dark about some of their saving or investment activities, no examples were encountered of unilateral appropriation or coercion in relation to share-outs or borrowing. In other words, for many members, engagement with the savings group is very much a 'family affair'. These findings significantly strengthen the initial observations made along these same lines by Zou et al. (2015). Thus, for many of the individuals we interviewed, engagement with the BoC savings group was one part of a larger, more complex picture of savings (including other savings groups), borrowing, income generation, and other financial flows. Figure 1 presents a way of seeing members' engagement with the savings group: from this perspective, the savings group member essentially acts as a two-way door to a wider network of family and social relations, through which

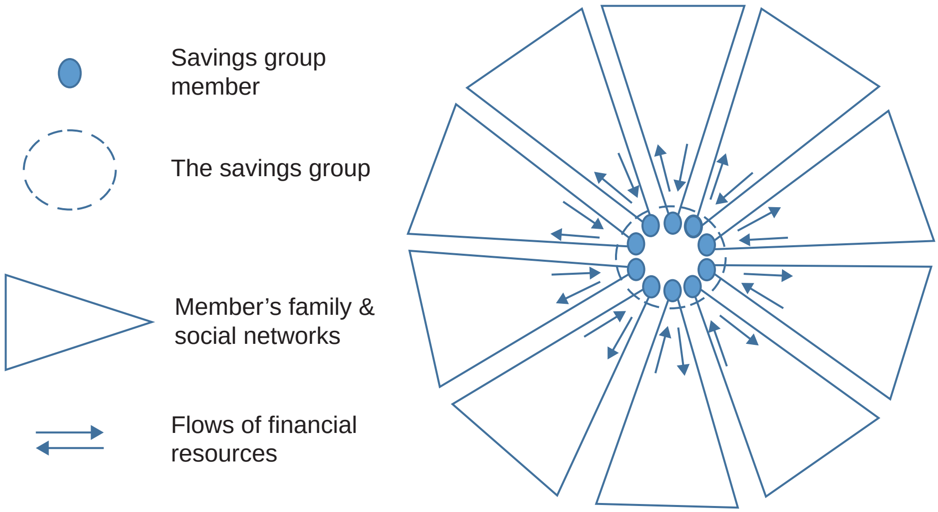

Figure 1 Youth savings group membership in context: it's about much more than the member

financial and other resources flow. The key point is that savings group members, and particularly younger members, do not engage with their groups as autonomous or isolated economic actors.

And yet, we argue that a conceptualization of members as isolated economic actors underpins savings group programmes like BoC. Thus, the training that often accompanies these programmes emphasizes individual learning, while the results frameworks focus on change in the member's circumstances including her or his income-generating activities, asset accumulation, knowledge, and behaviour. Our analysis demonstrates that a narrow focus on the group member will likely yield a much impoverished understanding of the dynamics and impacts of programme activities. For example, for members who rely on help from family members, relatives, or friends to save; or distribute share-outs and loans to others; or use multiple savings vehicles, the links between engagement with the savings group and change in their lives or livelihoods will be far from straightforward. A recognition of the deep social embeddedness of engagement with youth savings groups demands a fundamental reconsideration of the meaning of and appropriate approaches, designs, and methods for evaluating impact.

Finally, our findings highlight an important limitation of the discourse and the development programming around financial exclusion/inclusion. It is easy to assume that all poor people, or all young people, or everyone without a bank account is excluded. On the other hand, it is clear that many of the individuals we interviewed are anything but excluded. Indeed they are members of, benefit from, and contribute to active social networks of financial inclusion. Programmes that seek to foster greater financial inclusion must begin to recognize and build on these networks. This will necessitate confronting some deeply held assumptions about individuals, society, and social relations, and the individual/social basis of economic activity.

Acknowledgments

This paper is an output of the Banking on Change Academic Partnership, which was established in 2014 between the Banking on Change programme (a partnership of Plan UK, CARE International UK, and Barclays Bank) and the Institute of Development Studies (IDS). The views expressed here are solely those of the authors. We are indebted to the BoC partners for their support during the course of this work. We also acknowledge the helpful suggestions made by an anonymous reviewer.

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